

Family Responsibilities and Women's Working Lives

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ABSTRACT

As a result of changing social norms and economic imperatives many Australian women are now participating in the paid workforce. This paper discusses how women in Australia juggle their dual roles of employee and carer. It canvasses changes in government policies and workplace practices that support women's working lives and examines the impact of women's family responsibilities on their social and economic status.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades there has been an enormous increase in the number of women entering the labour market. However, it appears that society still views women as the primary carers of children and other family members and, as a result, many women are now faced with juggling the role of mother, partner and daughter as well as employee. In this paper we examine, briefly, the trends in the participation of women in the paid workforce; some of the reasons for these trends; and, most importantly, the issues that arise for women as they try to balance their paid and unpaid work commitments.

II. CHANGES IN THE INVOLVEMENT OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

Australian women are increasingly participating in the paid work force. As is shown in Table 1, participation rates in paid employment amongst Australian women, especially married women, have increased dramatically over the last three decades. In May 2000, approximately 56 per cent of married women in Australia participated in the labour force. Thirty years earlier, in May 1970, this participation rate was only 33.5 per cent (ABS, Cat. No. 6204.0, May 1970 and 6203.0, and May 2000). In addition, there has been a substantial increase in the number of mothers seeking employment over the past 25 years. For example, in 1979, 44.4 per cent of all married females with children were participating in the labour force. By June 1999, this figure had increased over 40 per cent to 62.9 per cent.

However, a continuing feature of women's participation in the paid workforce is their over-representation in part-time (most often, casual) employment. Almost 58 per cent of the married women in the paid workforce are employed on a part time basis, as compared to only 13.3 per cent of employed men and one quarter of single, employed women, (ABS Cat. No. 6224.0, June 1999).

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**Table 1: *Labour Force Status for Australian Women by Marital Status:
percentage of total population***

	Employed		Unemployed	Not in the Labour Force
	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Full time</i>		
<i>Married, no children¹</i>	16.7	30.3	1.7	51.3
<i>Married with children</i>	34.3	25.6	3.0	37.1
<i>Lone Parent with dependents²</i>	24.6	22.3	8.8	44.3
<i>Single woman, no dependents</i>	11.4	33.5	3.9	51.2
<i>All women</i>	22.1	28.0	3.6	46.2

Source: ABS, Cat. No. 6224, June 1999; ABS, Cat. No. 6203, June 1999.

Notes: 1) Married persons include those in de-facto relationships, where their spouse was a usual resident of the household at the time of the survey.

2) Lone parents are defined as the heads of a one-parent family.

Furthermore, Australian women continue to be employed in a set of industries and occupations that are quite distinct from their male counterparts. For example, only four industries, Retail Trade, Health and Community Services, Property and Business Services and Education, account for 56.3 per cent of the Australian female workforce (ABS, Cat. No. 6310.0, August 1999). In comparison these same four industries employ 30.2 per cent of male workers in Australia (ibid).

Australian women also remain clustered into a relatively narrow band of occupations. Almost half (44.5 per cent) of all the jobs held by Australian women are in clerical, sales and service occupations. The professions (such as nursing) also account for a significant share (20.6 per cent) of the jobs held by Australian women (ABS, Cat. No. 6203.0, June 2000).

In common with their counterparts in other parts of the world, Australian women still earn, on average, lower wages from their jobs than do men. At February 2000, the ratio of the average weekly ordinary time earnings (AWOTE) earned by Australian women working full time to the AWOTE of Australian men working full time was 84 per cent, translating to a pay gap of 16 per cent (ABS Cat. No. 6302.0, February 2000).

III. OVERVIEW OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REASONS FOR CHANGES IN PARTICIPATION

A complex range of economic and social factors has driven the changes in women's participation in the paid workforce and help to explain the features of their involvement in paid work. Among the economic factors that have been identified in the now extensive literature on the topic of changing participation rates of women are the need to supplement family income and changes in the employment and wage-earning opportunities available to women.

It is particularly important to note that women with family responsibilities participate in the paid workforce primarily for financial reasons (see for example, Jenkins, 1992, Bhavnini, 1994, Rohan, 1997). Indeed, Gregory and Hunter (1995) argue that many mothers in fact need to work in the paid workforce to prevent their families from falling into poverty. This is especially the case for the growing number of single mothers, amongst whom the incidence of poverty is high (see, for example, Duncan and Edwards, 1997). The falling real value of men's wages since the 1970's (McGurie, 1994) has also meant that returning to work has become an economic imperative for an increasing number of married women.

Changes in the wage and employment opportunities available to women have also allowed/encouraged more women to participate in the paid workforce. Legislative initiatives relating to equal pay for women, the growth in the sectors of the economy where many women find work, and the removal of restrictions on the employment of married women have all been important factors encouraging women into paid employment (see, for example, Kenyon and Wooden, 1994).

Social changes, which are intertwined with the above economic factors, have also contributed to the rise in the involvement of women with family responsibilities in the paid workforce. As Brown (1985, p.184) notes, women evaluate activities such as participation in paid work and the use of services such as market based childcare 'within a social structure that defines [their] role and its required activities'. Changes to social norms that legitimate women's involvement in paid work and their use of, for example, child care services, are necessary preconditions for a change in participation rates.

In summary, the increasing involvement of women with family responsibilities in the paid workforce reflects both economic imperatives and changing social norms. Many women now see this form of participation in society as both an economic need and a social right. A question remains, however, as to whether the family responsibilities that are borne by women might constrain their ability to fully achieve their employment goals.

IV. WOMEN'S FAMILY COMMITMENTS

Despite the rapid growth in women's involvement in the paid workforce, it appears that little has changed for women in terms of their family commitments. As shown in Table 2, women still perform most of the household tasks of Australian families. In 1997, Australian women spent, on average, 3 hours per day performing household duties (such as meal preparation, laundry and housework), an amount that was almost double the time spent by their male counterparts (ABS Cat. No. 4153, 1997). Furthermore, the data in Table 2 demonstrates that sex segregation also still characterises unpaid work in most Australian homes. Women take on most of the responsibility for meal preparation, laundry and housework, whilst men take on a greater role in garden and home maintenance.

Table 2: Minutes Spent Per Day on Domestic Duties.

Domestic Duties	Males	Females
<i>Total Housework</i>	40	139
<i>Food and Drink Preparation</i>	26	69
<i>Laundry and Clothes Care</i>	5	33
<i>Housework</i>	9	37
<i>Other Total Housework</i>	50	36
<i>Ground and Animal Care</i>	27	23
<i>Home Maintenance</i>	17	4
<i>Household Management</i>	7	9
<i>Associated Travel</i>	3	2
<i>Other</i>	4	3
Total	97	180

Source: ABS, Cat. No. 4153.0, 1997

Australian women also continue to take on the majority of the responsibility for childcare in their families. In 1997, men, spent on average, less than one-third as much time on childcare as did women, who spent, on average, 45 minutes per day caring for children (ABS Cat. No. 4153, 1997).

Women also appear to be taking on the lion share of the growing task of caring for elderly relatives. In 1998, women represented 88.7 per cent of all the 'primary carers'¹ of parents in Australia. 82.1 per cent of the primary care for individuals other than parents, spouses and children, was also performed by women, (ABS Cat. No. 4430.0, April 1998).

Importantly, women continue to perform most tasks relating to household duties and childcare when they enter the paid workforce. This is shown by the data in Table 3, which relates to the use of time by married Australian men and women with children. Married women with children who are employed full time still spend, on average, approximately 5 hours per day on activities relating to housework, meal preparation and childcare. Men in such family relationships who are employed full time spend, on average, only 2.9 hours per day on such tasks.

Table 3: Time Allocation by Married Australians with Children, 1997: hours per day.

	Males			Females		
	<i>Committed¹</i>	<i>Contracted²</i>	<i>Total work</i>	<i>Committed¹</i>	<i>Contracted²</i>	<i>Total work</i>
<i>Employed Full-Time</i>	2.85	6.97	9.82	4.98	5.10	10.08
<i>Employed Part-Time</i>	4.03	4.37	8.40	6.77	2.61	9.38
<i>Not Employed</i>	4.57	0.60	5.17	8.43	0.09	8.52

Source: ABS, Cat. No. 4153.0, 1997

Notes: 1) Committed work refers to tasks associated with existing social and community relationships and includes housework, childcare and shopping.

2) Contracted work refers to tasks associated with paid work and education.

The data in the above table also provides an indication of the trade-off that many women make between their family responsibilities and their involvement in the paid workforce. For example, it is interesting to note that the total work time of men and women is, on average, very similar. This indicates, in turn, that the key difference in time allocation between the sexes occurs in the division of this work time between paid and unpaid work (see also Miller and Mulvey, 1998).

The data in Table 4, below, points to a similar conclusion about the relationship between family responsibilities and paid work. They show, as could be expected, that having dependent children involves a large time commitment for women. The figures also show that these family-based time commitments are typically associated with a reduction in the time available for both leisure and paid work. For example, a married woman with dependant children worked, on average, 9.2 hours per day in 1997, with 76 per cent of this working time being taken up by her family and other social commitments. In contrast, single women, on average, worked only 4.62 hours and only 47 per cent of this time was committed time.

¹ The ABS definition of a Primary Carer is: A primary carer is a person any age who provides the most informal assistance in terms of help or supervision to a person with one or more disabilities. The assistance has to be on going or likely to be ongoing for at least 6 months and be provided for one or more of the core activities. That is, communication, mobility or self-care.

Table 4: *Time Allocation by Australian Women Aged Over 15 years:
hours per day.*

	Committed¹	Contracted²	Total Work
<i>Married with Dependent Children</i>	6.98	2.24	9.22
<i>Married with Non-Dependent Children</i>	5.68	2.05	7.73
<i>Married with No Children</i>	4.67	2.20	6.87
<i>Lone Parent</i>	5.62	1.96	7.58
<i>Single</i>	2.15	2.47	4.62
<i>Average</i>	5.00	2.20	7.20

Source: ABS, Cat. No. 4153.0, 1997

Notes: 1) Committed work refers to tasks associated with existing social and community relationships and includes housework, childcare and shopping.

2) Contracted work refers to tasks associated with paid work and education.

On the positive side, there has been a narrowing of the gender gap in unpaid work time over the recent years. As shown from the data in Table 5, this change is largely occurring through a reduction in the amount of time spent, on average, by Australian women in unpaid work, rather than an increase in the amount of time spent by men on domestic duties. Thus, the sex segregation of unpaid work has remained a relatively constant feature of time use patterns in Australian households (see also Bittman, 1999, p.30).

Table 5: *Changes in the Hours of Domestic Duties Performed by Australian Men and Women, 1992 to 1997.*

Duties	Males (change in minutes per day)	Females (change in minutes per day)
<i>Total housework</i>	3 min. increase	8 min. decrease
<i>Food and preparation</i>	2 min. increase	2 min. decrease
<i>Laundry</i>	1 min. increase	1 min. decrease
<i>Housework</i>	No change	5 min. decrease.
<i>Total other housework</i>	4 min. decrease	5 min. increase
<i>Ground and animal care</i>	3 min. decrease	1 min. increase
<i>Home maintenance</i>	3 min. decrease	No change
<i>Household management</i>	4 min. increase	5 min. increase
<i>Associated travel</i>	1 min. decrease	No change
<i>Other</i>	1 min. increase	1 min. increase
Total	No change	2 min. decrease

Source: ABS, Cat. No. 4153.0, 1997

V. THE IMPACT OF FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PAID WORKFORCE

Data from a variety of sources indicate that many women find it hard to achieve their desired combination of work and family time. For example, family responsibilities appear to constrain a woman's choice of occupation. Indeed, it is a common tenet of the traditional analysis of gender differences in occupations and, more generally, earnings, that marriage induces women to seek 'more convenient and less energy intensive jobs' (Becker, 1985).

Family commitments also appear to limit many women's ability to achieve their desired level of participation in the paid workforce. For example, in 1997, more than one-third of all the Australian married women with children who were working part-time hours were doing so because of either family reasons or childcare issues. The corresponding figure for married women without children was 2.0 per cent, whilst only 4.6 per cent of the married men with children who were working part time gave family and/or childcare reasons for their reduced working hours (ABS, Cat. No. 6342.0, August 1997).

Additionally, it appears that many Australian women desiring some participation in the paid workforce are unable to achieve this due to their family responsibilities. For example, in 1998 there were approximately 670,000 Australian women who wanted to work but who were either unemployed or not in labour force. One third of this group of women cited their need to care for a dependant child as the primary reason for not working. In contrast, only 3.3 per cent of the men who were marginally attached to the labour force cited family commitments as the reason for their labour force status (ABS, Cat. No. 6220, September 1998).

The combined effect of all these constraints is likely to be both emotional and financial. It appears that many women experience stress due to their dual roles in the workplace and at home. Indeed, a recent survey by Baron (1987) found that 7 out of 10 American working mothers experienced difficulties combining career and motherhood. The recent ABS Time Use Survey (ABS, Cat. No. 4153.0, 1997), indicated that more than half of Australian couples with dependant children always or often feel pressed for time. This compares with 37 per cent of couples with non-dependant children and 25 per cent of those without dependant children. In addition, the survey found that Australian men experienced a higher degree of 'free time'² during the day than did women. In 1997, men working in full time employment had 21 minutes extra of free time per day than did their female counterparts (ABS, Cat. No. 4153.0, 1997).

The financial impacts of women's family responsibilities derive from the limitations imposed on participation in the paid workforce, whether it be in the choice of occupation, hours of work or involvement per se. The data on the gender wage gap presented in the above section reflects in part the nature and significance of this impact. Estimates of the effect that marriage and having children has on individual earnings provide further insights. For example, Preston's (forthcoming) analysis of the determinants of men's and women's earnings using 1996 Australian Census data indicated that having children, typically caused an Australian woman's earnings to be significantly reduced, by 8.4 per cent compared to females who did not have children. For Australian men, on the other hand, the presence of dependent children did not significantly affect earnings.

VI. POLICIES AND WORKPLACE PRACTISES TO ASSIST WOMEN WITH FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

The above discussion highlights the need for government policies and workplace arrangements that help women cope with the demands of their working and family lives. The apparently little scope that exists for women to re-negotiate their role in relation to family responsibilities within the home makes such initiatives to accommodate women's family needs particularly important to women's success in the labour market (Bittman, 1999, p.30).

² Free time is the amount of time left during the day after time has been spent on necessary, committed and contracted time. Free time include social and community interaction, and, recreation and leisure.

The availability of high-quality, affordable childcare is widely recognised as a critical factor in determining the ability of women with young children to participate in paid employment (see, for example, Bittman, 1999, Barrow, 1999 and Heckman, 1974). The accessibility of childcare centres has also been identified as an important factor in determining a mother's ability to return to work after the birth of her child (see Cohen and Fraser, 1991 and Holtermann 1992).

A number of studies have also demonstrated that government childcare subsidies significantly reduce the cost of childcare and, thus, help to remove the financial barriers faced by mothers returning to the workforce (see, for example, Bloom and Steen, 1990 and Cattani, 1991). Furthermore, these subsidies apparently are highly progressive in terms of offsetting the cost of childcare for working parents, especially single mothers and those on low incomes (Schofield and Polette, 1998).

Australian governments have responded to community demand for childcare assistance through the provision to parents of subsidies for their childcare costs and through the direct provision and monitoring of childcare places. Specific initiatives include the provision of a Childcare Benefit that subsidises a range of childcare services, such as those provided through centre-based long day care, family day care and outside school care (ABS, 2000). The government also directly funds a large number of childcare centres. In June 1998 there were 339,400 such centres in Australia, as compared to only 46,000 in 1983 (ABS, 2000, and COAG Childcare Working Group, 1995). In 1998, 14 per cent of Australian children under the age of 12 were in formal childcare, as compared to only 9.1 per cent in 1987 (ABS, Cat. No. 4402.0, June 1999).

However, it has been argued that recent government initiatives on childcare have not assisted working parents. For example McIntosh (1997/98) estimates that the cuts to funding for the Australian Government's Family and Children's Services Program over the period 1996-97 to 2000-2001 reach \$851m. McIntosh also argues that recent increases in total funding for childcare and other parenting services do not cover the growth in the demand for childcare services, nor allow for qualitative improvements within the system. Rather, the government subsidies for childcare services cover the bare minimum to accommodate increases in the demand for government initiatives.

Furthermore, it appears that Australia still lags behind some Western industrialised countries in the support offered to working women with childcare needs. For example, according to Bittman (1999, p.38), the level of government financial assistance available to Australian women pales in comparison to that available to their Finnish counterparts. Finnish women are entitled to a government grant of 3 months maternity leave at full replacement of their previous pay and 7½ months parental leave at 80 per cent of their previous pay. Nursing leave at zero pay, but with a cash benefit equivalent to the cost incurred by the State in the provision of municipal day care is also available for the first 3½ years of the child's life. The Finnish government also offers a government-subsidised reduction in working hours for parents of both children aged under 4 years and children who are beginning school. 78 per cent of Finnish children receive high-quality state subsidised formal childcare.

Government policies on welfare payments also have a significant bearing on the ability of women to participate in the paid workforce. In particular, the cut in welfare payments that is typically associated with participation in the paid workforce often imposes a financial penalty on women wanting to enter or re-enter the paid workforce. For example, according to Beer, (1998), the tax and welfare arrangements that were in place in 1997 meant that families with three children (including one in childcare) only gained an extra \$12 a week when the mother increased

her paid working hours from 5 to 35 hours. Apparently, in some cases, the take home pay income of a low-income family actually fell after a mother's return to work (Beer, 1998).

It is widely recognised that the presence of family friendly workplace practices are a further key factor influencing the ability of women with family responsibilities to successfully participate in the paid workforce (Macran, Dex, and Joshi, 1996 and, Callender, Millward, Lissenburgh and Forth, 1997, Probert, 1997). Family friendly practices span a range of initiatives relating to the physical facilities (such as childcare centres and family rooms) at the workplace; paid leave provisions (such as parental leave and career breaks); and flexible working time arrangements (such as control over start and finish times). Simple provisions, such as access to a phone to contact family members can also help working women with family responsibilities (DWRSB, 1998).

Presently in Australia many workplace practices relating to the provision of 'family friendly' workplaces are regulated by legislation. For example, one of the principle objectives of the Federal Workplace Relations Act 1996 is to assist employees to balance their family and work responsibilities. Under the Act, employers have a legal responsibility to provide family friendly work place practices. This legislation, in conjunction with anti-discrimination laws makes it unlawful to dismiss an employee on the grounds of family responsibilities or parental status.

Australian employers have, apparently, also been making some effort to respond to the needs of their employees with family responsibilities. For example, the data in the table below indicates that many Australian workers now take advantage of flexible and reduced working hours.

Table 6: *Work Arrangements to Care for Children for Families with Employed Parents: percentage of total families where the parent is employed.*

	Father Employed	Mother Employed
<i>Flexible working hours</i>	18	36.8
<i>Permanent Part Time</i>	1.9	33.7
<i>Shift work</i>	5.3	8.5
<i>Working from home</i>	7.4	15.4
<i>Job sharing</i>	0.5	3.9
<i>Other</i>	1.2	3.5

Source: ABS Cat. No. 4402.0, June 1999.

Note: 1) Percentages will add to over 100 due to the fact that more than one work arrangement can be made

However, Australia's performance in terms of employers providing family friendly workplaces is currently below world best practice levels, as is demonstrated by the comparison of Australian and U.S. workplaces in Table 7 (see also, Russell and Bourke, 1999). In particular, this data suggests that organisations in America offer far more family friendly work practises than do their counterparts in Australia, especially by offering compressed working weeks, employee assistance programs, on-site or near site childcare facilities, and information and referral services. Other strategies in America, such as bringing a newborn child to the office, have been seen as revolutionary (Nelson-Horchler, 1986).

Table 7: *Australian and U.S. Organisations Offering Various Family Friendly Policies: percentage of all workplaces.*

	Australia	U.S.
A) Flexible Work Options		
<i>Flexible Hours</i>	56	74
<i>Part Time Work</i>	92	69
<i>Job Sharing</i>	56	57
<i>Working From Home</i>	51	43
<i>Compressed Working Week</i>	17	54
<i>Paid Maternity Leave</i>	25	26
<i>Paid Paternity Leave</i>	14	26
<i>Paid Leave for Adoptive Parents</i>	23	29
<i>Career Breaks</i>	16	17
<i>Use of Employee Sick Days for Family Commitments</i>	81	57
B) Dependant Care Arrangements		
<i>On-Site or Near-Site Childcare Facility</i>	3	17
<i>School Holiday Care</i>	3	9
<i>After School Care</i>	1	9
<i>Childcare Information and Referral Services</i>	25	83
<i>Eldercare Information and Referral Services</i>	15	74
<i>Emergency Backup or Sick Childcare</i>	6	17
<i>Nursing Mother Rooms</i>	4	26
C) Work and Family Services/Benefits		
<i>Employee Assistance Program</i>	56	97
<i>Relocation Services</i>	74	83
<i>Support Group for Employees with Family Issues</i>	23	43
<i>Seminars for Employees with Family Issues</i>	7	63

Source: Mulvenca, (1999) and Bankert and Linchfield, (1998).

The provision of family friendly workplaces has some obvious benefits for working women, however, Russell and Bourke (1999) also identify significant benefits to organisations that engage in such workplace practises. These include a number of productivity enhancement benefits, such as improved commitment and motivation and a larger pool of labour from which to select staff. They also include the benefits derived from the community recognition given to 'family friendly' employers.

However, the provision of such workplace practices by employers is not problem-free. First, currently, the majority of practices target working women and do little to facilitate men's family commitments (this is reflected, in part, in the data in Table 7). A second limitation is that the practices are generally seen as fringe benefits and, therefore, they can be offered or taken away as economic circumstances change. Finally, many of the 'family friendly' provisions that are currently available take the form of 'flexible' working conditions and reduced working hours (see Table 7) and these can come at a significant cost to women in terms of their job security, training and promotion opportunities (see Austen, 1996).

Despite these criticisms, family friendly work practices, together with supportive government policies on issues such as childcare, will remain a key determinant of whether women are able to successfully achieve their employment and personal goals. As more women enter paid

employment and seek to reap the financial and personal benefits of their education, the need for supportive workplace practices and government policies will increase.

VII. CONCLUSION

As a result of changing social norms and increasing financial pressures there are more women than ever participating in the Australian labour market. Despite these increases, evidence suggests that there has been little change in the level of domestic and household duties performed by women. Some policy initiatives of the current and previous governments have assisted working women. However, Australian women still earn less than men, do more domestic and household duties, and feel pressed for time. Childcare responsibilities, in particular, appear to result in many women leaving the paid workforce during the years that are most critical to their career development and this can have long-term impacts on their ability to achieve financial independence. Further progress in the areas of policy and workplace practices is clearly needed before Australian women can achieve their economic and social goals.

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